

The Bright Beauty of the Moonlight

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The Bright Beauty of the Moonlight

by [Silberias](#)

Summary

Young woman of Keramzin, willing to relocate to Kribirsk, Carveya, Os Alta, or Balakirev. Trained in home-healing, gardening, cooking, and education of children. Willing to parent step-children; without experience in caring for those of advanced age, but willing to learn. Can provide references upon request. Seeking man of established and stable profession with only rarely required Fold crossings. References will be required, including proof of income. Write to Madam A. Kuya of Keramzin with interest.

Marriage of Convenience with a twist - Ana Kuya convinces Alina to post an ad / answer an ad posted by a bachelor in Os Alta seeking a wife, rather than sign up for the army. The man was an oprichnik and has been killed in action between the time he told Alina where to go & when she arrived. She appeals to General Kirigan to help her return to Keramzin since the wedding is obviously off...but he has other plans.

Notes

Special thanks to [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#) for your hard work beta-ing a kind of sad first few chapters and to [KrazyKyStaHatter](#) for your help with Grisha weddings & funerals!

Title is from an English translation I found of [Green Island Serenade](#), which I've been in love with since I first heard Vienna Teng's cover of it. It isn't exactly what inspired this, I'm filling my own prompt from the Darklina server, but it definitely fits the mood of the fic. Give it a listen!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1



The Bright Beauty of the Moonlight by Silberias

[moodboard made by nightquills](#)

They sent her to see the Black General himself. He was apparently, in addition to his other duties, the official head of the oprichniki; he had been meant to break this news to her. The letter was likely on its way to Keramzin, she'd been told as they led her to wait in the hallway outside of General Kirigan's offices. Alina hadn't exactly found it in herself to cry over the death of Dmitri Anokhin—she hadn't known him beyond a few letters—but she was mortified and afraid for whatever she was supposed to do next.

Young woman of Keramzin, willing to relocate to Kribirsk, Carveya, Os Alta, or Balakirev. Trained in home-healing, gardening, cooking, and education of children. Willing to parent step-children; without experience in caring for those of advanced age, but willing to learn. Can provide references upon request. Seeking man of established and stable profession with only rarely required Fold crossings. References will be required, including proof of income. Write to Madam A. Kuya of Keramzin with interest.

Ana Kuya had said to conceal that she was an orphan and half-Shu to boot until the last possible moment, and to conceal her own last name. It would mean that she received more replies, and it minimized the risks she faced from kidnappers and other unsavory characters. Alina had been nervous to put up the ad in the labor periodical—the ‘seeking spouse’ section was new in the last thirty years, according to Ana Kuya, which amused the old woman in parts but relieved her in others.

It had been a landmark decision of the previous tsar that being a homemaker was a manner of employment deserving of legal recognition. It meant that people could seek spouses beyond their own communities. It meant that the still-novel concept of dissolving a marriage had some teeth—in business, two partners were owed equitable distributions of a business that was sold or broken up, so why not in marriage? It had been a move meant to appease the rich of West Ravka, but it had proved to be popular in East Ravka as well. Women had rights—real rights beyond the dubious ‘right’ to be drafted into the First Army.

The replies they received were varied. Some men wanted caretakers for their dozen children. Others were desperate for someone to care for their aging parents. Others wanted to know how many siblings she had, how many siblings her parents had had—Ana Kuya had translated that for Alina as a man who either wanted no children, or would want too many. A man who wanted too many children ought to be treated with care, as he might not appreciate the back-breaking work that pregnancy and childbirth was. A farmer who wanted a lot of children was to be preferred over a city man who wanted the same—one man understood hard, physical work, and the other did not.

Alina had written back to a few of the men with questions about their lives. What did their households look like right now? How old were their children? How many children did they hope to have? Did they intend to stay in the city they lived in now, or did they have plans to relocate? Did they expect her to work? How long were their own hours? Based on their replies, she either declined their interest or requested their references and allowed them to ‘advance’ in the process.

It was this or the army, and Ana Kuya had convinced Alina that the army was not in her best interest. Almost none of the men really appealed to Alina, who chose to save the information about her family and heritage back until she was certain she had a pool of viable candidates.

Dmitri Anokhin was different, though. His letter had been hand-written in a regimented hand that almost looked like it had been type-set, but had been crossed out in places to show it hadn’t been typed. He was an oprichnik in service of the Grisha of the Little Palace who had recently earned a promotion, and with it the option to apply for a family cottage and move out of the bachelor’s wing if he had a spouse.

He provided a letter from his direct superior, a Major Kaminsky, notated with an official seal from General Kirigan’s desk itself, and a statement from his bank showing his long-standing account and balance. Ana Kuya had tutted over the manner of employment, but had approved of the reference letter and proof of not only income, but savings—that these had been provided without being asked for showed a man who was organized and paid attention.

That he wanted a larger, private home was not unreasonable; Alina herself was seeking the same, and living on the grounds of the Little Palace would provide her a buffer from the casual discrimination she faced so often in Keramzin. The Grisha might not be exactly *warm* to her, given what was done to their kind in Shu Han, but she would not be working with them, so it would probably not be *too* bad.

If he had balked in person at reading her own missive, he had not let it show in his return letter. In her letter, Alina informed him that she was half-Shu—and was not sorry for it—that she was an orphan without any connections for him to leverage for further promotions or any expectation of inheriting property from family, and that she did not have anything to bring to a marriage beyond herself. She had expected him to never reply, or to send a polite retraction of his offer, but had been pleasantly surprised to receive a letter where he proactively called out his acceptance of everything she'd told him.

He was a man whose parents had served the Little Palace—his mother as a Grisha, a soldier, his father as an oprichnik. He explained what Ana Kuya had suspected—he wanted privacy and a life of his own, which is why he sought a wife. If she wanted to work, he would support her as best he could, but given his profession she might be required to limit her search for work to what was available in the Little Palace. He didn't exactly care if he had children; he left that up to her. If they ended up unable to suit one another, he would not be a boor about dissolving the marriage.

Alina accepted, asked where and when they might arrange a wedding. Dmitri had in turn sent money for taking the post carriage to Os Alta, saying that if the end of the month worked for her, then he should be ready to marry her then. That had been three weeks ago.

Three weeks wherein a lot had happened, apparently. Well, nothing had really happened for most of that time—it was only in the last few days where things took a turn.

There had been an attempt on General Kirigan's life; though the man himself lived, several oprichniki and Grisha had been killed and dozens more injured. Dmitri had been gravely wounded and left for dead by the assassins, but not before he'd put up an incredible fight where he had killed three of them first.

He'd died of his injuries in the night, only hours before Alina herself had arrived in Os Alta and begun the arduous process of being allowed onto the grounds of the Little Palace. It was not normally so awful, but for the assassination attempt making security much tighter than it had been of late.

The oprichnik who had started to process her paperwork froze at the name on it, but said nothing.

No one had said a thing to her until she'd been formally admitted on the grounds, and a Grisha in a red kefta greeted her. He was Dmitri's superior, the Major Kaminsky who had written the letter of reference. He greeted her with a sad look and a formal *Miss Starkov, if you would come with me*, before leading the way to the hallway where she now waited.

She didn't have to wait long, which surprised her. Somehow she'd thought that with all of the other chaos, there would be justification in making her wait. The Black General would have more pressing concerns than a jilted orphan from Keramzin.

Alina was halfway through rehearsing her request when the door opened and another Grisha in red beckoned her inside. The room was not what she'd expected—something dim, with black lacquered furniture and black walls and shuttered windows had been on her mind—and she was greeted with cool blue walls and natural wood burnished to a warm shine.

Once she was settled at the large desk in a comfortable (if utilitarian) chair, she was left alone. Well, not entirely alone, as she could hear someone in the next room over through the door. Alina kept working on what she would say to get some—any—assistance with returning to Keramzin. Ana Kuya would be angry with her for returning, but what other option did she really have?

“Miss Starkov, I apologize for the tardy reception,” a tall man said as he came into the room from the side office, his appearance perfect except for how drawn his face was.

General Kirigan, her mind supplied, taking in the black kefta. Alina made to stand and greet him in return, but he shushed her and took a seat across from her behind the desk.

Before him were several papers—including what looked to be her own letters to Dmitri, as well as ones marked with a large *COPY* stamp done in crimson ink. Alina felt a little foolish for not noticing the papers sooner, but in fairness she had been trying to focus on her own concerns.

“General Kirigan, I presume?” He had not introduced himself; he could not think her rude.

“Yes. I would say that I am sorry for your loss, but,” he gestured at the papers in front of him, “Dmitri was as frank about himself as you seem to have been. Still, it must be a disappointment.”

Ah, the sheets marked *COPY* were copies of Dmitri’s letters to her. It made sense, that information leaving the Little Palace was controlled and recorded. Did they read the letters of just the oprichniki, or of the Grisha as well?

“It is sad, I agree. He seemed kind and forward thinking. It is a loss for your guardsmen as well; I am sure he had friends who mourn him. For myself, I must beg your assistance with returning to Keramzin. We had planned on marrying later this week, and without him I do not have anyone to turn to here in Os Alta. If I could beg your hospitality, I only need a night or two to rest and wait for the next carriage heading south. I can help in the laundry or the kitchens, if necessary.” She fell silent then, waiting for him to reply.

He was a handsome man, beautiful in the way that only Grisha could be. She wondered what Dmitri had looked like—probably fit and well-kept as well, given his profession.

“Stay for the funeral. Dmitri was excited for your arrival; let his ghost see you as his eyes have failed him in death. I don’t know how much you’ve been told, but I owe him my life. I am happy to offer you accommodation and assistance.” He paused then, looking away from her a moment, fiddling with what looked like a cutting from the labor periodical she’d posted her ad in. “As I am offering room and board to all the other widows, it seems fair. You needn’t work.”

“Thank you, I—I appreciate your kindness.”

She hadn’t meant to stumble on her words, but something about his invitation screamed that he had other things on his mind. Things he wanted to say to her, but either hadn’t worked up the courage—a laughable idea for a man of his high rank and outright power—or didn’t feel it was the right time to do so. Alina hoped whatever he had to say didn’t delay her planned return to Keramzin.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I was blown away by everyone's responses to this fic, thank you so much!! I hope that you enjoy this chapter! As a mental image, I'm going with either Vivaan Shah or George Blagden as a faceclaim for Poor Dead Dmitri.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Major Kaminsky escorted her at her request to see Dmitri where he'd been laid out ahead of the funeral. General Kirigan's words haunted her—Dmitri had been excited to meet her, had looked forward to her arrival enough that he had shared the news widely enough for his commander to know it.

Let his ghost see you as his eyes have failed him in death, was not a phrase she'd ever heard before, and she wondered if it was a Grisha saying.

A red ribbon had been laid across Dmitri's face, over his eyes, and he had been dressed in a grey tunic and trousers. He'd been savagely beaten after being overwhelmed by the group of Fjerdans who had infiltrated the palace grounds, left in a dubious state of 'alive' because of his oprichnik uniform. His actions had bought General Kirigan enough time to shake off his own ambushers and turn the tide of the skirmish.

They had had to triage the wounded, and when it had come to his turn, Dmitri had insisted the healers treat one of his other comrades first. If he hadn't done that, he might have been strong enough to recover from his injuries. Internal bleeding was one of the more difficult things for a Grisha healer to address if it had gone on for too long.

"Why is the ribbon red? No—no one else has a red ribbon."

"I—well, that is something you will have to ask the General. It is not my place to really tell. I can tell you that Dmitri came from a Grisha family, and kept Grisha traditions. The ribbon is one of them; it symbolizes the knot that ties the soul to the body. It's untied now, and we lay the ribbon across the eyes so the soul does not try to return where it cannot last."

Perhaps that's what the General had meant earlier in his office.

"Is there anything that should be said? Something—something Grisha?" she finished a bit lamely, feeling the worst kind of inadequate bordering on insensitive. She didn't know their traditions, had never really bothered to learn about Grisha before.

"If his parents were living, they would say something. If—if you had been able to marry, you would have bid him to return to dust."

Major Kaminsky left it unsaid whether or not she would be asked, or maybe even allowed, to offer up those words since she was essentially nothing to Dmitri Anokhin. The promised assistance with

returning to Keramzin could not come soon enough. These people were hurting, and she stood among them without money, without employment, without purpose.

Feeling the eyes of several other people on her, Alina realized she was imposing herself on those who might want time alone with their lost loved ones. She needed to wrap up her own visit. She stepped closer to the table Dmitri was laid out on and tucked her hair behind her ears, biting her lips to give them a little color. Major Kaminsky didn't pull her away or say a word as she composed herself. She hadn't had time to refresh herself—to wash her face or comb her hair—between her arrival early this morning and the grueling intake process of checking her papers before she'd even been allowed on the grounds.

"Well, this is me, Mr. Anokhin," she began, then remembered he'd asked her to call him by his first name. Everyone she'd spoken to had also used his first name, even General Kirigan. "Dmitri. I'm sorry I was too late to meet you, but I know you were very brave. I—" she hesitantly rested her hand on his, his skin uncomfortably cool against hers as she threaded her fingers with his, "—I know we would have liked one another. At the orphanage, I would do the same thing for Mal, make sure that he was okay even if I wasn't. They are letting me stay for the funeral. I don't know what I'll do next, but I promise I won't forget you or what we could have been. So—I'll see you later, then."

The room was deathly silent as she gently put Dmitri's hand to rights at his side. His nails had been trimmed, and the fresh edges scratched at her hand as she let him go. The pricking had her sucking in a surprised breath. It was like he'd reached out for her, to let her know he'd heard her. Alina knew that wasn't true, but she was having a difficult time trying to envision what he'd looked like alive.

His cheeks flushed and ruddy, his curly hair a living cloud around his head—those she could see, but what had his smiles looked like? His brooding looks over a cup of wine? Were oprichniki even allowed to drink wine?

Alina didn't realize it immediately, but she'd started to cry. It wasn't fair, that she had spent so much time reviewing letters, writing to men she'd never met, and this one had seemed so...so perfect. The sort of person she could forge a life with, with space and time to make herself important to someone, to be someone's lover and someone's friend. And he'd—Dmitri had wanted those things too. It was so unfair.

"Miss Starkov, you've had a long day. Let me get you set up with somewhere to rest and freshen up. The funeral is tomorrow morning at dawn—we can send someone to fetch you. In the meantime, take some time to come to terms with...with this."

"What happened to his family?" she wearily asked as Major Kaminsky let her into a guest room.

He hesitated for a long moment, looking at the ground as he chose his words before looking up into her eyes. "His father was like you, without a gift. He died of cholera at the southern border a number of years ago. His mother was a heartreder, incredibly skilled at her craft. She was never the same after her husband's death, but she fought hard each day. We never learned what became of her, but the General believed at the time that it was a band of Kaelish mercenaries who took her. Mr. Anokhin—*Dmitri*," he seemed to permit himself to speak less formally, "buried her as we bury all those who never make it home: with an empty uniform folded on a small pyre. He did it with a promise to apologize if she came home to only warm words, if not warm wool."

Alina nodded, wiping away another round of tears.

“Would—would I be expected to say anything for him? I—I could, if it’s expected. I don’t mind.”

She seemed to catch him off guard, but a wan smile stretched at his mouth eventually.

“We would be honored. I know the General would be touched; he expressed a concern that you would resent us for what happened to Dmitri. As you know, Dmitri insisted that the healers treat the Grisha first, so—”

“I could never hold that against you. Him—I must forgive him, he’s dead.”

“That is true enough, Miss Starkov.” His smile turned sad. “We must always forgive the dead, or they will steal our sleep as we steal theirs. Would you like to have a tray sent up for supper, or would you prefer to join us? You won’t have to make conversation. Suppers...suppers like these are silent, to respect the dead.”

She hesitated, thrown off kilter by the options presented. Major Kaminsky had a kind face, but not everyone had been so warm. The oprichniki she’d met had been kind, if a little sorrowful and sheepish as they spoke to her. The Grisha looked at her with suspicion that she was sure they felt was deserved.

Were the majority of them like Major Kaminsky, or were they like the men and women she’d glimpsed today? Were they at all like their business-like and efficient leader, General Kirigan?

“Is that just for...the Grisha who died?”

Major Kaminsky’s face softened.

“Not everyone wants a Grisha funeral with all of the old traditions involved, but most oprichniki do since they tend to come from Grisha families. The Saints abandoned them, deprived them of their family gifts, so we give them what we can. Everyone returns to dust, Miss Starkov,” he said. After a breath, he added, “General Kirigan said you are welcome to come. There isn’t anything to it, only do not speak. And...have a healthy appreciation for preserved fish.”

“What?” She couldn’t help her shocked tone, her half-smile at the impish grin that stole over her guide’s face for a moment.

“We are to eat simply until after the funeral, it is part of our mourning—you’ll see what I mean. Sending for a tray won’t spare you, by the way. Shall I collect you later on so we can walk together?”

“I—of course. I would be honored. Like I said, I just don’t know...the Grisha ways of doing all this.”

Supper was silent as promised, and the food was simple. Pickled herring, rye bread, a few root vegetables, and water. The only noise was the clink of cutlery on plates, a few coughs. Alina was seated next to Major Kaminsky at the end of one of the tables that were arranged in a triangle spanning the width of the room.

Next-nearest to her sat General Kirigan, who ate alone at a small table obviously meant for two diners. The chair he sat in was made of clean, unburled dark wood, and at his left was a matching chair with gold and silver filigree swirling along the back and on the arm rests. No one joined him for the whole meal, though a setting was laid out.

Alina burned with questions, and found herself glad that they were required not to speak. She wouldn't have been able to overcome the urge to whisper questions to Major Kaminsky, who seemed like on any other occasion he might have told her what it meant.

As everyone eventually started to retire for the evening, to their own pursuits or duties, Alina tried not to look lost. Major Kaminsky had gone off with a man who broadly scowled at her when she took a step to follow them.

A red haired woman in an intricate white coat stepped forward and took her arm, one of the only people in the room to notice Alina's confusion. They walked quietly for several dozen paces even after they'd left the dining room. Once they were a respectable distance from the dining room the woman clutched Alina's arm close and introduced herself as Genya Safin before she murmured her condolences on Dmitri's death.

"He—he was very excited. He told everyone that would listen that the General had agreed to preside over the ceremony, and that he was to have several days off to help you settle in. Don't listen to anyone who says differently, Miss Starkov—Dmitri had great dreams for what your lives would be like. After the funeral tomorrow, I can tell you anything you want to know."

"I think...I'm not sure how long I will be here. I asked for assistance returning to Keramzin, not—not because I don't care, but," a sob burbled in her chest that she fought back, "the future I thought I had. That we had. It's gone. I don't have anyone, Miss Safin, but I know they'll give me room and board in Keramzin if I work hard."

The redhead hummed, her tone not quite disbelieving, but not exactly in full agreement. "Have you been...informed of when you'll be leaving?"

"No...? I imagine I'll find out tomorrow, though."

"I imagine you will," Miss Safin said, a tremble to her mouth like she had something else she wanted to say. "Now, off to bed. We all must be up quite early tomorrow."

Her room was silent and a little cold; no fire had been laid, but Alina appreciated it all the same. She'd spent colder nights in Keramzin, which was further south, and had not had the kind of privacy this bedroom afforded her.

Undressing and shucking on her nightrail—one on which she'd embroidered the collar and cuffs with curlicues and waves to recall the gray of the oprichnik uniform—Alina quickly shuffled into bed and pulled the covers tightly around herself. She curled around her clasped hands to try and dream of sweeter things than Dmitri laid out for his funeral.

Alina wasn't sure it hurt more or less that she didn't know what his voice sounded like. Had he been quick to laugh? She liked to think he had, given how everyone was treating her with kid-gloves, as though she was something or someone precious. As she dropped off to sleep, she faintly remembered the way Dmitri's nail had scraped at her, and she wished she'd been given any time with him at all—forever, even.

Thank you all for your comments on the last chapter, let me know what you thought of this one! <3 <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by the incomparable [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#)

And the chapter count is officially going up to at least 7...we will see where we go from there!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina woke up to someone knocking at her door before they abruptly opened it. Half-awake, she groped for her steel comb that she'd put under her pillow and brandished it at the intruder. It was Miss Safin, bearing a lamp and a wry smile.

"You've chosen your weapon well. I may be the only person who would take you up on such a duel, Miss Starkov, but I come in peace. Come, let me help you get ready. The General says you're to walk with him and carry the flint."

She blushed and set the comb aside, sitting up in bed and putting her feet on the cold floor. "The—flint?" Saints, she was so tired.

"Yes, the flint. It's a great honor, one that normally goes to—" the woman caught herself, again not saying something that was obviously on her mind. Her hands fluttered for a moment as she rifled through Alina's things for a suitable outfit.

Alina ventured a guess, wanting to prove herself to this woman. She was not a wilting flower, no matter her shock and tears of yesterday. "The widow."

Miss Safin's eyes, glassy with unshed tears, snapped to hers.

"The widow, yes. Or whoever is the highest ranked in the family if there is no widow. For a bachelor orphan such as Dmitri, General Kirigan would have held it himself. The inferni will come to you for their flints a few times this morning. Dmitri was not the only orphan, nor the only one whose family shunned them. And...Miss Starkov, you must not let anything you learn today slip—do you promise me?"

"That I'm going to carry the flint...?"

"No, people know about the flint, and many of them know you'll carry it. A number of those who know see it as fitting. No, what I mean is that the General would like a private word with you after the funeral."

Alina nodded, shivering a little at both the cold of the room and the intense look in Miss Safin's eyes. "What?"

The redhead only pressed her mouth into a twitching approximation of a smile and shook her head as she reached for Alina's hands to help her to stand and quickly dress. There was something off

with how Miss Safin had spoken to her last night and again this morning—there was a secret she danced around so obviously, it was like she was begging Alina to figure it out.

She was out of luck, though, for Alina had never been much good at riddles and secret answers. Hopefully her conversation with General Kirigan would be more illuminating.

“If—if you aren’t allowed to tell me, can you at least tell me...nothing bad is going to happen to me, right?” Alina asked as she sat on the bed again to tug on her boots.

Miss Safin was leaning against the small vanity that sat between the two windows in the room. Dawn was approaching, lighting the sky a dusky mauve with spikes of lavender low on the horizon, and only the little lamp Miss Safin brought in with her provided any real light in the room.

“General Kirigan has told me he intends to keep you safe. More than that, you will have to learn from him.”

“Miss Safin?”

“I cannot tell you what you wish to hear, Miss Starkov, and I cannot speak where it is not my place. It’s something you learn when you’ve been at the Little Palace for as long as I have. Now come; we have a melancholy task to set ourselves to.”

Alina was startled to find Major Kaminsky waiting outside of the door for them. With him was the scowling man from last night, and General Kirigan himself.

Miss Safin took a steadying breath and seemed to draw up armor under their eyes, walking ahead of Alina into the hallway.

The three men bowed to the two of them—Major Kaminsky giving a crisp, formal one, his companion sketching something that could have been called crisp but was still frigid, and General Kirigan making his with a kind of timeless elegance.

“Good morning, Miss Starkov. I hope you were able to find some respite,” General Kirigan said, offering his arm.

Alina hesitantly took it, glancing at Major Kaminsky and Miss Safin as she did. Each of them were solemn for the most part, but encouraging as well.

The texture of the General’s kefta beneath her fingers was jarring—the heavy embroidery caught on her nails, on the calluses on her hands, while the silky feel of the Grisha-made cloth slid like oil under her fingertips. Alina wondered for a panicked moment if he thought her cold for not greeting him first.

“Thank you. It was very kind of you to make room for me.”

“It was necessary. I don’t think any of us could face you if we hadn’t made every effort.”

Alina bit her tongue on the words that floated up in reply that Dmitri had just been an oprichnik, a glorified guard, and that she was just one of Duke Keramsov’s orphans from his experiment in generosity. It would throw General Kirigan’s generosity, and whatever the Grisha considered their own conduct yesterday, in everyone’s faces. One of their own had died—she might still say it, but she would say it in private to the General if it came up again.

The grounds were thick with fog as they walked out of the Little Palace, and the courtyard was filled with dozens of Grisha and oprichniki. One of the funerals had already occurred, but several of them had been held off so that friends of the dead could be rushed home from border postings, and so that family of the oprichniki who had died might also travel to the Little Palace if they lived within a few days of Os Alta.

A group of inferni, their blue keftas bright with red and orange and yellow embroidered flames, came up to her. Each one gave her the flint that they used to spark fire from otherwise nothing. Each one bowed, perfect and formal, with clicked heels and a murmured, “Thank you, Miss Starkov,” before making room for the next person.

The small rocks clicked against each other in her free hand, and she wished she’d put on gloves. Everyone else was wearing them, even the General. It was too late now, though, and it would warm up soon enough once the sun was properly up.

The five bodies were draped with black sheets and arranged on small, well-sprung carts hooked up to glossy white ponies. She half wished she could tell which one was Dmitri—but then she had no idea how she would react to seeing him again, laid out for his funeral alone, his body jostled by the cart as they walked in a large group out onto the grounds.

The morning was cold, not warming at all as she’d thought it would as dawn broke over the horizon, and the walk was upwards of fifteen minutes before they arrived at the funeral ground.

Once the full group had assembled, the General cleared his throat and said a few opening words—they largely went over Alina’s head, but she tried her best to pay attention. Alina’s free hand—the one filled with cold flint—ached from the chilled air, while her other stayed relatively comfortable from the warmth that seeped through General Kirigan’s sleeve into her fingers. She focused on the low gravel of his voice, on the warmth of his arm, and on the feeling that she was safe here for at least a little while longer.

The groundsmen had constructed five pyres, and they helped the oprichniki gently move the bodies from the carts to each of the pyres as General Kirigan spoke. The General finished speaking right as one of the men nodded to him that all was ready.

“Polina,” he said softly as the group turned to the first of the pyres, “do you have anyone else here who would like to also say a few words?”

A woman who looked to be in her thirties shook her head, her strawberry blonde hair swept back in a half-hearted braid. Her eyes were red from crying, her face pale above the blue of her kefta. She comported herself well, though, her voice carrying through the fog that her brother had been a brave man—that Pawel had inspired her and carried her heart’s burdens like no other. When she finished speaking, she hesitantly made her way to Alina to take a piece of flint.

She stopped short, her outstretched hand pausing before falling back to her side. “Can—I—I can’t,” she managed to say, her whole body rigid as she tried to maintain her bearing. “I can’t do it. He—”

“Your brother will understand, Polina, and you are not alone. We all share your pain at his loss,” General Kirigan said. “May the others help you shoulder this task?”

Polina sniffled a soft ‘yes’ and dashed away a few tears that glittered like diamonds in the half-light the fog left them in.

The General beckoned the inferni to step forward, and Alina let go of the General's arm to better cradle the pieces of flint she'd been charged with, giving them back to each inferni as they came to claim them. After each fire was set, the inferni returned the flints to her, standing ready for the next.

It was a gruesome business, made worse by one of the men—the husband of a dead oprichnik named Tanya—throwing himself against the pyre of his wife and weeping with abandon as he begged her not to leave him. They all stood quietly as he drew the black sheet back to kiss Tanya's forehead, to kiss her cheek, to tuck his head into her neck as his sobbing trailed off. Alina burned with shame that she would not be able to bring herself to make such a display when it was her turn.

“Miss Starkov?”

She looked up at General Kirigan. His eyes were steady as they met her gaze, his handsome face somewhat jarringly lit warmly by the fires of the other four victims of the attack on the Little Palace.

Alina swallowed and stepped forward. “I think you all know how I came to be here. Dmitri Anokhin wrote to me a few months ago. I wrote back to him. We...made plans, thought ourselves lucky in our way. I've heard...that he was as excited for the future as I had let myself become.” Her eyes burned—from the smoke, from a sudden welling of emotion that stole over her against her will—but Alina soldiered on. “He gave me hope. I didn't know him, not like all of you did, but I know he is missed and that the people at the Little Palace mattered to him. I never knew him, but I miss him all the same.”

And, sensing the end of her little speech, the inferni collected their flints back from her one last time. Their numbers included Polina who grasped Alina's hand tight and stared into her eyes searchingly. Alina didn't realize what Polina wanted for a long moment, and then it came to her—she wanted her permission to help with this ritual.

Alina squeezed Polina's hand and nodded, biting her lips tightly as the woman turned and walked with the inferni to send Dmitri to his rest.

The fog drifted off eventually as they watched the pyres burn, but the sunshine didn't warm her back nearly as well as the fires before her. General Kirigan was stoic at her side, never letting his attention stray from his task. Alina had retaken his arm, both to steady herself and to draw a little comfort from the intimacy of standing so close together.

When the fires had died down, having burned hot and fast at the hands of the inferni, the General spoke a final benediction over the dead—one that Alina wished she'd been told of, so that she might have replied to it with them. To look less of a fool, if anyone had been looking her way.

“As they return, so will we all.”

General Kirigan reached and pressed his gloved hand over hers where it rested in the crook of his elbow, turning them away from the funeral ground and leading the way back to the Little Palace.

“We have much to discuss, Miss Starkov, but I think that the first matter to address is breakfast—you're swaying on your feet.”

Let me know what you thought of this chapter!!! Thank you for all your kind words so far!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Again, I cannot thank [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#) enough for their work beta reading this story. Love you both!

You've all been so kind with rolling with some of the worldbuilding I'm engaging in, but I do want to point out that the funeral from last chapter is more or less what is in the books I guess as how Grisha funerals go--I adapted it to feel more vague, since Alina just kind of got dumped into "now we're going to a funeral!" because the first time I went to a religious funeral for someone it was...confusing to say the least. You barely know where to stand, where to sit, what to do. I got some help on what Grisha funerals are like from the wonderful [KrazyKyStaHatter](#)

Now -- food. You cannot eat rye bread & pickled herring all the time. You will die of scurvy. I don't care how Grisha you are, vitamin C is a thing. So I've decided, and you'll see me continue to decide in my other stories, that rye bread & pickled herring (and root vegetables) are something that's eaten when the Grisha community is in mourning. They end up eating it a lot because of constant war, but when they aren't having a silent meal before a funeral they eat ACTUAL normal peasant food.

I'm going to spend some time after work today replying to comments, thank you all for reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The breakfast that General Kirigan treated her to was much more varied than the supper the previous evening. There was savory oatmeal with a dab of honey and butter on top, currants, soft boiled eggs, toasted bread, and soft cheese. Alina sat at the place that had been set for her and waited patiently while the General quickly prepared some tea, privately amused when he put several sugar cubes on the saucer for her and put two into his own cup, obviously holding himself back from adding a third.

“Can I send for anything else?” he asked after he’d picked up a spoon, but before he’d started in on his oats. His dark eyes had her pinned in place for a long moment before Alina shook her head and murmured her thanks. The spoon was heavy in her hand, but she forced herself to start eating a moment after he did.

The food was very good, and she appreciated that he didn’t make her engage in small talk even though the silence was far from comfortable for her. Miss Safin’s words from the night before and again this morning, her strange looks at Alina, had finally coalesced into something to be genuinely concerned over in Alina’s mind. She was glad that they had some privacy—she didn’t exactly want to question him before an audience.

“Now, I know we both still have smoke in our hair, but I find that putting things like this off never betters the outcome,” General Kirigan said when they’d both finished and he’d poured each of

them another cup of tea.

Alina cradled her teacup, relishing the heat of it suffusing her fingers. There would be little time for things like this in Keramzin, let alone with handsome men like the one who sat across the table from her. It would be bending and scraping to Ana Kuya lest she be packed off to ‘volunteer’ for the army. The old woman’s dubious sense of mercy had only extended to paying the ad fee charged by the periodical, and Alina returning would not be looked at favorably.

“Has anyone given you a... let’s say, an account of events a few days ago?”

Alina shook her head in reply.

“Well, a force of more than thirty Fjerdans—a mix of soldiers and druskelle—broke into the grounds. Into the Palace itself. They’d bribed some palace guards to learn what those men knew of the oprichniki watch schedules, and they killed two oprichniki before spreading out in search of Grisha. They ambushed us in our beds—myself included. If Dmitri had arrived even a minute later, I would be dead. He distracted them, and killed three of them as he did so. Normally...normally druskelle will hit Grisha twice with an ax once they’ve been rendered unable to defend themselves. Once across the neck, severing the windpipe and the blood vessels there, and then again right here,” he drew a line from his cheek to his eyebrow, cutting across his eye, “and they had me right where they wanted me. Then, like one of the saints of old, there stood Dmitri Anokhin drawing them to him—it allowed me to get free, to fight again.”

“How come they didn’t...kill him...right away?”

“They pride themselves on trying not to kill otkazat’sya unless they have to, but they have little mercy for those who serve Grisha. So they left him for dead instead of murdering him outright; to their knowledge, he was otkazat’sya like them.”

Alina froze, her tea cup halfway to her mouth as she stared at him.

“Fedyor mentioned that you asked about the ribbon. Why it was red, and why no one else had one. Dmitri was a heartrender, diligent and subtle, and he chose to work as oprichniki to help keep all of us safe. He chose to live like he’d been born without a gift. Only a few are brave and skilled enough to pull that off successfully. It is why he waved off the healers—he thought he would be able to recover on his own, and he did not want anyone else to know about his true abilities.”

“Would...would he have told me?” she asked, setting her tea down and twisting her fingers together—a nervous habit that Ana Kuya had hated, but had never been able to break her of.

General Kirigan looked away from her and shifted in his chair a moment, then cleared his throat and said, “No. I don’t think he would have. At least, not without speaking to Fedyor or myself first. That isn’t to say he would have kept other personal and private information from you; he spent literal hours here with us going over what he could and could not say to you. He wished for a partnership, one based on a shared understanding and mutual support.”

Alina felt her eyes get hot at the conflicting reactions she had to this information. On one hand, it flattered her that a Grisha had thought her special enough, somehow, to spend a life with her. She didn’t like that he might never have told her the truth, that there would have been people around her who looked down on her for not knowing, for not seeing what was right in front of her eyes. Would they have laughed when her back was turned? Would Dmitri have lost his apparent earnest interest in her? Would he have longed to be free of her?

“I’m sorry, I’ve upset you. If you’d like, we can finish our discussion at a later date,” General Kirigan said, his voice soft. He was not pushing her to say anything one way or another; all she would have to do was nod or shake her head. He wasn’t asking a lot from her, and yet—

“A later date?”

“Obviously you will want some time to recover from this,” he started to say, and Alina could *smell* the deceit on him.

“General Kirigan. I appreciate your time, I do, and I appreciate the things you’ve told me. But if you are going to lead me through a dance, at least have the *courtesy* to tell me which one it is first.”

He blinked. Then he shook his head the slightest amount and blinked again.

“So this is the woman brave enough to throw her lot in with a stranger. I’d wondered where she was. Well, to put it simply, I owe my life to Dmitri.”

“You said as much,” she gritted out, angry that it seemed he was going to try and talk in circles again.

“By Grisha tradition—one that he died absolutely expecting I would honor—I must take in and care for his family. That would include marrying his widow if I was able, parenting his children if he had any, and caring for his parents.”

Alina felt breakfast stir in her gut and wished, prayed to all the saints, hoping against hope that he didn’t mean—he couldn’t mean—

“But we weren’t married. You—you can’t.”

“The situation is unique, I admit, but I owe him the life he lost. That includes honoring the promises he made to you about your future, to the extent that I’m able to. That includes a wedding, a full life, and a partnership. It would cast a pall on his sacrifice if I were to stick you on the next post carriage to Keramzin, and his ghost would torment me for such an affront.”

General Kirigan let the silence lap at them then, turning to pour himself another cup of tea with another two lumps of sugar in it. The late morning sun gave his parlor a welcoming aspect, the blue walls turning nearly white with how the light struck them.

Alina worried at the outside seam of her trousers, the nervous tic hidden beneath the table well enough. Many of the Grisha had been kind and welcoming to her despite their grief. Aside from the strange way that Miss Safin and Major Kaminsky had acted, most of those she spoke to were open in their affection for ‘poor Dmitri,’ tutting over the tragedy of her arriving barely in time to attend his funeral.

“You...you wouldn’t try to *keep* me here if I truly wanted to go, right?”

“Provided you weren’t trying to run into the snow without proper equipment, or injured and in need of medical attention, you would be free to leave the Little Palace under the same restrictions that all oprichniki and their families live under.”

She understood his meaning without it getting spelled out. The papers on his desk yesterday, Dmitri’s letters transcribed with *COPY* written in red ink across the top. There was a certain benefit

in growing up in an orphanage, in a way, given that their things were looked through routinely to make sure they hadn't stolen anything or hoarded away some piece of food.

There were rules about when the children could go somewhere, or where they were allowed to even go in the first place. Here in the Little Palace, some of her secrets might be her own— especially if she...if she married him, like he was suggesting she do—but there were other things she could not expect. Marrying a merchant in Os Alta would certainly be less complicated in a number of ways.

But...something about him called to her. The direct way he looked at her, the way he spoke, the way that he watched her and seemed able to predict her every move—it was intense, but Alina found that she liked the attention. She had so rarely ever felt special in her life. She'd hoped that Dmitri would make her feel special, make her feel wanted.

She was also out of real options, and she hoped that General Kirigan was telling the truth that this was a debt he owed to Dmitri—one that he was expected to honor by all of his people.

"I..." Alina struggled for the right thing to say, not wanting to offend him. "I don't really have anything against the idea. I already got over the idea of marrying a total stranger. I just...everyone seems so affected by Dmitri's death. I don't want them to think that I didn't care, that I'm just looking out for myself."

"If it helps, many Grisha here would look down on me for sending you away rather than marrying you. It need not be the kind of relationship you and Dmitri envisioned, but abandoning you to your fate because of some quibbling thing like it being too soon for you to look for another partner... there are some here who would lose all respect for me."

"So it's a matter of national security that we get married?" He still hadn't asked, but now that she'd warmed to the topic the least bit, he seemed to loosen up as well.

"Not exactly—just another headache for me. If you truly wish to return to Keramzin, I will accompany you there myself. What do you say?"

"You haven't asked me, General Kirigan," she found the courage to say, comfortable that he would not have some kind of fit over her arch tone or her teasing question.

"Is that your only reservation, Miss Starkov?"

"Yes," she sniffed, picking up her tea and taking another sip even though it had gone cold.

"Well then, if that's all," he said, a glint to his eye and a smile tugging at his lips. "Miss Starkov, would you do me the honor of accepting my hand in marriage?"

"I would be honored, General Kirigan," she replied, her belly twisting with nerves at the idea of how the Grisha would react.

Miss Safin had seemed so concerned last night and again this morning. Major Kaminsky had been treating her with kid-gloves, as though he might give away the expectations he harbored for both herself and his commanding officer. Alina was sure that those two, at the very least, were some of those who would lose respect for the General if he did not make an offer to look after Alina in this way.

“Wonderful. I will set Ivan to planning things. He’s been itching to organize my affairs ever since he and Fedyor married. Does the end of the week sound good to you?”

Alina almost dropped her tea at his sudden question before stuttering that the end of the week suited her fine. After all, the Fjerdans had essentially and effectively forced her to cancel her other plans for the end of the week.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it, let me know what you thought!!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to: [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#) for beta reading and for your perfect, absolutely perfect, suggestions & brainstorming for some of my world-building here.

Thank you also to [KrazyKyStaHatter](#) for help with book canon Grisha weddings & funerals.

Lastly: thank you to both Ysannelsard and TwiceKilledCatherine for your help with navigating what is book canon Ravkan and what is actual Russian, I appreciate you all so much!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

General Kirigan sent for Miss Safin and *First* Major Kaminsky after he'd secured Alina's agreement. When Miss Safin arrived, he bid them both goodbye with a bow, not taking Alina's hand to kiss her fingers or touching her in any way.

She tried to understand—he had not had a wife for three or four decades, at least, and they weren't marrying for affection. Still, his easy manner from their earlier conversation was gone now that he was in front of his staff, and Alina found that she missed it.

It turned out that *First* Major Kaminsky was the man who'd scowled at her after supper the night before and walked with them to the courtyard this morning. Something in him relaxed, though, when the General announced that he and Alina would be marrying at the end of the week. What a strange man.

"I imagine you have a dress that you were intending on wearing?" Miss Safin—Genya, as she now insisted Alina call her—said as they walked back to the room that *Fedyor* had given her.

Alina burned with embarrassment thinking of the simple blue dress she'd chosen to bring with her. It was one of her nicer dresses, and one she'd planned on wearing with some regularity—but that perhaps wasn't possible anymore.

Alina knew from reading fashion periodicals—ones that the Duchess had given to the orphanage to 'improve' the children's understanding of culture and refinement—that over the last several years, women had started wearing extravagantly styled dresses that they then turned around and stuffed in a cedar chest or a dress bag in the back of a closet after a single use. A blue dress was fine for becoming Madam Anokhin. What would be required for—?

"Don't overthink things, Alina. I only want you to have a dress in case you didn't bring one."

"It's just...it's just a nice blue dress," Alina said, her voice low and a little ashamed as she went to her carpet bag to pull out the dress. It didn't even approach silky fabric worn by the Grisha in terms of beauty, or even quality. Just plain linen with a detail of blue cornflowers twining with white lilies around the collar.

“Alina,” Genya’s voice was kind as she gently took the dress from Alina’s numb hands, “this is lovely. You will never get General Kirigan to admit it, but he loves lilies. This is perfect.”

“But—”

“There will be time for getting you a more appropriate wardrobe later, but part...part of this tradition is taking the widow as they come to you. After the wedding, there can be jewels and fur cloaks and silk slippers, but for now this is perfect. No one expects anything different from you, Alina—they only expect *you*. I promise.”

Alina sat down on the bed, watching Genya put the dress in the small closet.

“I’ve never...did Dmitri intend on using Grisha words? I don’t know them. I—I’m still trying to come to terms with everything. I thought we would have a little time.”

Genya hesitantly sat down next to Alina and took her hand, her fingers warm and solid against Alina’s own. She let them sit in silence for several moments, the sounds of people walking in the corridor mixing with the faint sounds of birdsong outside—one of the windows was propped open just a few inches to let in fresh air.

“I don’t know what Dmitri would have wanted to use; you would probably be better off speaking to one of his watchmates, or to Fedyor. I know he abided by Grisha traditions to honor his mother, so it wouldn’t surprise me if he had wanted to use our words. The General would have let him,” Genya said with a small smile.

Alina suddenly wondered if Genya legitimately didn’t know that Dmitri had been a heartrender, or if she did and it was supposed to be a secret that died with him—with only a single red ribbon across his eyes to ward off his soul returning to his body. If it was a secret even from Genya, then Alina knew she could not ask. It tore at her.

“What are they? The words?”

“Well, whoever has agreed to marry the two people together places thornwood crowns on their heads. In turn, the couple gives a length of braided ribbons or cords to the officiant—one they braided together, and they each contributed ribbon or cord to. Then they face each other and recite their vow to one another. The words themselves are some of the oldest we have for ourselves. Typically the elder partner starts first, but not always. The words go: We are soldiers. I will march with you in times of war. I will rest with you in times of peace. I will forever be the weapon in your hand, the fighter at your side, the friend who awaits your return. I have seen your face in the making at the heart of the world, and there is no one more beloved, followed by their intended’s name. Once both have said their vows, the officiant binds their hands and announces to those gathered that the two are bound together.”

Alina stilled, frozen at something that was missing.

Dmitri had...had said he would not be a boor about dissolving their marriage if they didn’t suit one another.

“Genya...do...do Grisha not believe in dissolving marriages?”

Her new friend laughed, lighthearted now, though her gaiety made Alina scowl.

“I suppose the concept is new for *otkazat'sya*, but Ravkan Grisha have always been free to release the ties that bind us to others, though there are those raised elsewhere who have a hard time with the idea. Grisha in Shu Han, for instance, would marry for life after a long courtship, promising to love one another until tomorrow's sun shines on today's earth. Conversely, those who built the Ice Court in Fjerda pledged themselves to one another each year at the winter solstice until they died or grew tired of one another; after that, they were free to look for a new partner.”

Alina's heart fluttered at the idea of what Grisha did in Shu Han—or had once done, as she wasn't sure if Genya spoke of distant history or more current practices. She briefly imagined courting someone over years before promising to spend the rest of her years with them—forever, because how could tomorrow's sun shine on today's earth? She shied away from the cool practicality of the Fjerdan marriage because she craved solid ground to stand on. She wasn't sure she'd be able to take such frequent reexamining of a relationship, though she could see how it might appeal to some.

There was also the General himself to account for. There was a kind of spark she felt when she was around him—as brief as it had been, yesterday and this morning—a spark that commanded her attention. Alina was gripped with sudden anxiety as she thought of him and his dark eyes.

“Genya...what...what about his last wife? His family with her? What will they think?” Saints, if he had children, they could be in their sixties, or even older—when she had said she was willing to parent step-children and learn to care for the aged, this was *not* what she had meant.

Genya chuckled though, a wicked smile crossing her face so fast Alina wondered if she'd imagined it. She had to have, because Genya's tone was still matter of fact; no mirth touched her words as she spoke.

“His last wife passed a number of years ago, and no one here ever met her because she lived in the country for her safety. The old man I learned my Tailoring from said that the General would visit once every few months and come back sad. They were childless, so when she died he had nothing, no one. Very, very few people know that last part about him, so do not spread it around. He is a very private person with important secrets. All in all, he is a bit like you—an orphan and a widow. Though I do suppose he's related to Baghra somehow; I've never been brave enough to ask either of them exactly how. But enough of that. We have the matter of your dress sorted out, and now we need to visit Yulia and see what we can coax out of her in terms of sweets.”

Alina allowed herself to get swept up in Genya's plans for the day, grateful that they could distract one another from the spectre of the funeral pyres at dawn. Genya took her to the glass gardens where they picked a few fresh apples—imagine, fall apples in the middle of summer!—and took them to the kitchens. A few people stood out to Alina as they wandered the halls, eating toffees that Genya had indeed cajoled out of the head cook, Yulia, while they were in the kitchens. She tried not to consider what those people might think of her—however they thought it might look for her to be walking arm in arm with Genya, smiling only hours after sending Dmitri off to his rest.

“Genya—this might be too private, but why does General Kirigan eat by himself at a table set for two?” she asked as evening cast long shadows in the room she'd been given to stay in.

Genya was poking and pulling at her hair, amusing herself with braiding it back. Her touch tingled and pricked just the slightest bit—her Grisha powers, undoubtedly, though Alina chose not to ask so that Genya could not deflect her actual questions.

“He awaits the Sun Summoner, like the rest of us. They will be his balance in everything: light to darkness, sun to shadow, and according to Grisha beliefs, woman to man. The Sankt'yanin are torn;

they do not want to be saved by a woman, but at the same time they adore the idea of a blonde, pale-eyed virginal figure raising up an outstretched palm to the Fold only to have it bow and melt away from her.”

Alina knew the mummer’s play Genya referred to—it had been a popular one at village fetes in Keramzin. Some refused to even believe the Sun Summoner would be *Grisha*, and instead called their saint *Zolotaya Svyataya*—their Golden Savior.

The arrival of the Sun Summoner would either be the making or breaking of Ravka, Alina thought but did not say.

“Do you have anything to put in your hair?” Genya asked after they’d sat in silence for a length of time. Alina’s head itched a little, but it was certainly bearable for seeing the glossy braids that the Grisha woman had effortlessly woven from mysteriously smooth locks of hair.

“No. A simple plait is fine, I promise. Thank you,” Alina said, meeting Genya’s eyes in the mirror.

“You must have something. Surely—”

“Genya,” Alina gathered up her courage and spoke firmly, “I have everything I was allowed to bring with me from the orphanage. You can look through my bag, I don’t mind. There’s nothing to hide or be ashamed of in there, but you will not find jeweled pins and brooches—even ones made of lacquered resin from West Ravka. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

Her new friend grew quiet and still, not seeming to know where to even put her hands. Alina didn’t envy the feeling—that powerlessness, that embarrassment. She hadn’t wanted to embarrass Genya, but the rawness of the last few days was catching up to her all at once.

The post carriage had been crowded with mail sacks and sour looking passengers whose faces changed with every stop, but they had made sure to leave behind their scowls at her appearance. Because of the attack on the palace itself, the security had been high, and she had shivered in the dawn gloom while hefting her bag as she stood in line with the palace servants and other retainers. It had been well on its way to being a muggy hot day by the time she was allowed onto the grounds. Then there had been the news of Dmitri, and then the cold night, and then a funeral—*five* funerals.

“I’m sorry too, Alina. I—you don’t disappoint me. I assumed wrongly. I—well, I want you to have something. It would only take Sofia a day or so, I think, to make something suitable to at least wear to your wedding. If that’s alright?”

Instead of answering, Alina turned a little and took Genya’s hands between her own, noting the perfect symmetry of every nail, the softness of her fingers, the slim golden band on the forefinger of her right hand. A wedding ring?

“You said there was time enough for all the finery, Genya. I don’t need anything right now. It makes me happy that you care so, though—it has been a long while since I had someone care. Since I haven’t been alone.”

“If you were an etherealnik or a materialnik, I would say—well, no matter. Let’s get you down to supper, where you can see what we really eat when we aren’t in mourning.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the outpouring of interest and excitement over this story, I hope that now we're getting somewhere that you're still along for the ride! Let me know what you all think of this chapter!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Beta read by the wonderful [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#)

Sorry for the delay, got nerdsniped by other fics and then I've also just been swamped emotionally with work the last two weeks. Trying to get this one finished hopefully very soon. In the meantime, prepare for a wedding!!

Please note, that this chapter Alina very briefly jumps to the conclusion that bad things are going to happen to her. Bad things do **not** happen to her <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina patted at the ring she'd slipped onto a necklace this morning right before she was shown into the—Saints, was this *another* one?—ballroom where they were holding the wedding today. It was not a ring that Dmitri had picked, as he would not have been allowed to wear a wedding band as part of the oprichniki, but instead one that Genya had helped Alina engineer to be made as a surprise gift for General Kirigan—to give him afterwards. Grisha wore wedding bracelets, and that was, she understood from Ivan, what Dmitri *would* have been permitted to wear as part of his uniform. Ivan had only shared this with her while he was grumping about forcing General Kirigan to spend time with the braidwork. It was a tedious business that required a good deal of focus; the knots were done using the tiniest threads, and missing even one loop could result in hours of work being undone.

“Grisha are never alone, Miss St—Alina. There are ties that bind to everything, and a wedding of two people isn't so dissimilar to the way that birds are knit to the air or fish to water. It is a natural state, but also a chosen one. Birds may also walk on the ground, and fish leap—however foolishly—from the water often enough. We are tied, all of us, to the making at the heart of the world. For our lives we are tied to our flesh, our bones, while our hearts work continuously to keep the knots tight.”

Ivan did not say it, but when the heart ceased to beat the knots slipped loose—and the soul would be woven back into what it had come from. It was an oddly comforting thought, and one that Alina found she liked a deal more than a heavenly plain for the good or a hellish waste for the bad. Dead was dead, she'd learned from a lifetime of losses, and alive was alive. That the Grisha had such a thoughtful way of saying nearly the same thing was also comforting, since she was to make her life among them now.

Sergei Aleksander Kirigan is what the General had said his name was yesterday as they sat together and braided their handfasting cord. Ivan had been with them, sternly supervising as they plaited the strands together, even making them re-do it a few times if he didn't like something about how it was coming together.

She had used a blue hair ribbon and a length of thin white lace carefully trimmed from one of her dresses for her part. The General—Aleksander, he insisted—had used two black cords that

appeared to be leather of some kind. When they'd finally managed something that met Ivan's approval, he'd taken it from them for safekeeping to be used today while he also frog-marched his commanding officer to finish working on their wedding bracelets.

Now she walked towards where Ivan stood, holding the handfasting cord with General Kirigan standing next to him solemnly. Many Grisha and oprichniki filled the room, all of them standing quietly—no one fidgeted, no one rolled their eyes. It was more than a little surreal, given that the few weddings Alina had seen in the village chapel had been jumbling and jostling affairs. She wasn't sure that this was how her marriage might have otherwise been, although part of her hoped it was solemn because of Dmitri's death. She hated the idea of a wedding that so closely resembled a funeral.

“—and there is no one more beloved, Aleksander,” she murmured what felt like hours later, when in reality it was mere minutes. She tied the bracelet around his wrist and looked up at him, suddenly at a loss of what she was supposed to do next. Aleksander cupped her face and she felt him flinch, though she was sure the movement didn't telegraph to anyone else. Alina didn't know what to say or do, frozen as he leaned down to press a chaste kiss at her hairline before drawing her to put her hand in the crook of his arm.

He did not take them to the dining room, where everyone else was headed, nor did he take her to the little room Fedyor had installed her in. No, he took her directly to his own suite of rooms, where he barred every door including his war room and study against all others.

Alina trembled at the barely restrained manic energy coming off him in waves, the bracelet he'd delicately tied to her wrist just minutes ago feeling heavier and heavier. How was she to get out of this if—if—what was going to happen happened? Dmitri had promised—but Dmitri was dead. Unbidden tears started to gather and she tried to sniff them back, tilting her head to keep them from rolling down her cheeks to no avail. The General heard her from the other room that he'd been busy in for a long few moments, and he approached her cautiously.

Like she was a wounded animal in a trap.

Like he was going to wring her neck.

Ana Kuya had warned her that it wasn't unheard of, for arrangements like the one she had made with Dmitri to go south. To end in tragedy. Why, then, had everyone been so kind when she was being led to slaughter?

“Alina. Breathe.”

She shook her head, her tears falling faster as she backed away. They'd told her so many secrets, so freely, because she wasn't meant to live.

“Alina,” he said again, reaching for her when she struggled back another few steps—he got one of her hands, although she didn't let him get a good grasp around her wrist before she snatched it away. It was like his touch was burning her. Like she was burning up. Her whimper brought him up short, finally, and he stopped moving towards her. He showed her both of his palms, his hands up like he meant her no harm. The bracelet on his wrist peeked out from his sleeve and Alina's heart lurched at the knowledge she'd tied it there herself.

“What has made you so frightened?”

He was going to do it whether she lied or not, Alina decided, so she told him in bald language what she thought was going to happen to her—and was a little startled when he nearly turned green at her words.

“Alina...you are safe here. You were always meant to be, I think. I’d no sooner harm you than I’d harm any of my—of the Grisha. I’m sorry I was so mysterious. I couldn’t—it isn’t something I wanted to do in front of everyone. In case I was wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You are Grisha,” he murmured, looking at her with some reverence, “at least I think you are. In case I’m wrong, though, I did not want to embarrass both of us in front of half the people here.”

She couldn’t find anything to say in response. *Thank you but no, I’ve been tested before? You’re mad! If I am an Alkemi, may I blow something up one of these days?* How can you tell if someone is Grisha or not? *How did it take you this long to notice me?* All of these fell far short of what she wanted to say, what she wanted her words to mean, so she stayed silent and just watched him as he again made his way across the room to her.

He took her hand, a sharp inhale his only reaction to the touch of her skin, and gently ran his thumb across her palm. With gentle fingers, he unbuttoned the cuff of her dress and slid it up her arm to her elbow, stroking her forearm and staring into her eyes. Alina could hardly breathe, could only let him do as he willed.

“What if I’m not? What happens to us?” she whispered, only the barest hint of sound. If someone had been listening at the door, they would have only heard continued silence. A muscle in his jaw twitched at her words, as though he didn’t like the bend of her thoughts. As though he did not like to be doubted or questioned, but he was choosing not to say so. Instead, he drew in a deep breath, finally flicking his eyes down to where he cradled her arm before meeting her gaze again.

“Then you will go to the country, where you will be safe and not bothered by me or anyone else here at the Little Palace.”

Alina frowned, not liking that idea. She’d enjoyed her conversations with Genya over the last several days, and Fedyor had been a charming guide when he had a moment for her. Polina had even sought her out a few times, sitting with her and holding her hand as they quietly read in the library or watched the comings and goings of the palace occupants together.

“Am I not allowed to be here?” she asked as he turned his attention to stroking the inside of her forearm, his fingers gentle.

“You’ll face too much danger. It is better I give you an anonymous life, if you aren’t Grisha,” he said, his tone a little absent yet still matter of fact. Shadows swirled around them, almost solid as they brushed against her ankles, through her hair.

“Aleksander—” she was about to argue with him when his hands tightened, one at her wrist and the other at her elbow, and Alina gasped at the feeling that flooded through her. It felt like stepping out of a hot bath into icy air, and she would have twitched away from him but for his firm grasp on her arm. That, and the bright light that burned out of her and fought—played?—with the shadows he’d covered the room in.

It was just light. Not like Polina's fire, but...light. Pure light. Warm like sunlight, and she felt filled with strength. Like she was running through a summer afternoon without a cloud in the sky.

Looking up at him, Aleksander's eyes were swimming with tears, and he seemed like he was fighting a losing battle against a smile.

"What is happening?"

"You, my little wife, are a Sun Summoner," he said, reeling her in by her arm and moving to cup her cheek with one hand. "I've waited so long, I've been...I've been almost alone for so long. I'd thought—perhaps you were inferni, given your bond with—but that didn't sit right. I knew, somehow. To think..."

Alina abruptly jerked her arm out of his hold, stepping back. The loss of their connection plunged them into darkness, and she took a few deep breaths as the shadows slowly dissipated. Aleksander looked like he wanted to reach back and grab her, but he didn't do it.

She paced a little, not looking at him, trying to find the right way to ask him, to not offend him, to draw the most information out of him, to know him a bit more.

"A few days ago, Genya almost said something to me about if I was an etherealm or a materialnik, what she might say then. What did she mean? Did she know?" Had he had Genya spy on her? Had her whisper thoughts into Alina's head that came from his mouth? The letters stamped *COPY* floated again in her mind. The long, uncomfortable line she'd waited in to gain access to the Little Palace. The apparently hours long conversations Dmitri had had with this man about what he was and wasn't allowed to say. This might be a place of safety for the Grisha, but that safety had come at a price. How would he have sought to control her, to get his hooks into her?

"We have a saying...if you are Grisha, you are never alone. Even in an empty room, you are connected to the making at the heart of the world—tied to it, irrevocably. We remind each other of it, when there is nothing else to say. It's perhaps...perhaps the one thing that all Grisha everywhere believe, more or less—that because of the making they are not alone." Alina recalled his words to Polina at the funeral, *and you are not alone*. What else could have been said, as Pawel lay on his pyre with his sister unable to strike a flame to send him on his way?

"But you've been alone."

"There have been stretches of time where I've let myself doubt, where I have wondered if because...because I am a Shadow Summoner, that the only fitting companion was the making. That I'd been left to trust, since being distrustful is one of my great flaws." He glanced away from her then, noticeably composing himself before looking at her again when she spoke. His expression was still colored by a kind of soft awe, like he didn't quite believe his eyes.

"And now?"

"I am not alone. And neither are you."

Let me know what you think, I've been feeling a little low that I took so long to get this chapter finalized (and probably drove my poor betas nuts while I did) I'd love to hear what you liked about it ^_^

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Again beta read by [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#), who are both lovely and wonderful. Thank you both SO, SO much!!

We have a brief jaunt into Genya's POV for a very important reason...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Genya had wondered if her standing meeting with the General would be kept during his honeymoon—a paltry ten days where he meant to take his wife to the country to help her settle in where she would not be at risk of being snatched up into the court intrigues of the Grand Palace, nor would she be targeted by his enemies who might wish to strike close to his heart somehow. She realized she needn't have wondered when Kirigan did not in fact even leave the Little Palace.

Fedyor, who was rarely a grumbler, grumbled that his carefully laid plans had been ruined before they even had time to unfold. There had, Genya gathered, been doves ready to be set loose and black ribbons ready to be tied to the General's carriage.

Instead of leaving, the General had mostly stayed sequestered in his rooms with Alina. He kept some of his regular meetings, and ventured out a few times with Alina on his arm to take walking tours of the grounds, but was otherwise absent from the dining hall and the other common areas of the Little Palace.

Knocking on the door to his study, Genya took a deep breath. She had a big request for him, hoping that now that he had Alina to look after, he might...he might listen to what she had to say. That his grand plans might now have room for this. It was dangerous to play with the knowledge she collected—there was a reason she never even reported to Fedyor or Ivan with her news from the palace. The kinds of things she knew were often safest for everyone involved if they stayed in her own head.

“Genya, welcome,” Kirigan said as he answered the door. Genya just caught sight of Alina as the young woman left the room, retreating into the General's living quarters and closing the door behind her. They smiled briefly at one another as the door closed, and Genya let herself relax a little at the bloom in Alina's cheeks, the certain ease she seemed to carry herself with—like she was glowing, now that her life had regained some equilibrium. They all mourned Dmitri, but thankfully Alina had hardly known him—not like Genya and some of the others, who felt his loss deeply.

“I know you have your report for me, but I actually have some questions before we get into that,” Kirigan said, gesturing for Genya to take a seat in front of his desk. She noticed the gleam of his new ring—the one she'd helped Alina procure for him from David—on his finger. His normal talon ring was gone, though whether it was for the day or for good was unclear.

“I'm happy to give you any answers I have,” she replied, glad that the meeting was already not on its usual track. It gave her an opening for her own purpose, her own request—one that he would be

more accommodating towards, since he couldn't perceive it as her taking the meeting off-topic. Kirigan was focused, his mind as sharp as a glass shard, and it was very hard to get one over on him in the best of circumstances, or to take conversations in directions he didn't intend.

He had something on his mind that he wasn't about to share with her, she could tell that much right away. There was a certain way that people walked when they had something they would speak of very soon, but for now were keeping quiet—and as he paced the room to sit back at his desk, that was the way he moved. He'd taught her to see it so she could better observe the court, and it was not like she could just magically hold back the skill when it was him she was observing rather than the Duke of Carveya.

"Is there an awareness at court of my marriage to Alina? The circumstances of it?"

"Yes, actually. The Tsar found out somehow that you were marrying the widow of one of your personal guard. I did not correct his information, only confirmed that it was true and that your other duties would be unaffected by your change in status. He was pleased to learn that Alina is not Grisha; he felt it would 'take you down a peg,' in his words."

"But the...the meaning behind such a marriage, that isn't known?"

Genya sucked her teeth for half a second, debating how to ask her question in light of his own.

"No. He knows the truth such as is available to him, but nothing nuanced. The Fjerdans cut down an oprichnik, you are marrying the woman left behind—perhaps a little fast for otkaznik tastes, and there is some talk among the Tsaritsa's ladies that you are just seizing on the opportunity to marry your mistress, but that you were honor bound? No, nothing in that vein. The Tsar made some noises about having you and Alina presented to the court, so expect that command to come to your desk soon."

He nodded, squinting a moment into the middle distance before focusing back on Genya.

"That was another thing I wished to speak to you about—if we are called to introduce Alina, I want you to take care of getting her ready. That will include etiquette lessons for the court, and perhaps also instruction for any private audiences she might end up having with the Tsaritsa."

"Of course, moi soverennyi," Genya readily agreed, deciding to ask now rather than wait for a better opportunity.

"Although, given the fact that you've married an otkazat'sya, perhaps your other plans—the long term ones—might be sped up while there's some political gray area?"

That glass-sharp mind immediately was on alert, his dark eyes burning as he stared her down. Genya forced herself to remain relaxed, using one of the techniques she'd learned from Ivan as a girl to keep her heart rate under control. *If the heart is under control, the body must follow*, he'd drilled into her head.

"And what plans are these, Miss Safin?" *Miss Safin* was his warning, one that very few outside of his circle would even hear. Genya certainly heard it.

"The ones set in motion before Kirigan," she breathed, "the ones that formed as the walls here went up. The ones that I think have been in the making for a very, very long time. The battle is always uphill, but they cannot say you only care for Grisha with Alina at your side. The time is now,

General. The people are ready for change, and you have just shown them you have the kind of heart that Pyotr lacks.”

He was silent after her words, ones she’d previously kept hushed out of respect and awe. It had not been hard for her—not with the spy training he himself had taught her, coupled with the study of blood and breath that Ivan had given her over the years—to become suspicious. To look at ‘Kirigan’ the way she looked at any visiting diplomat, the way she looked at those who came to court for no good reason but ended up landing themselves a great one to stay.

Was he *the* Black Heretic of old? Genya wasn’t entirely sure on that point, but she was sure that this was the same man who had negotiated for the construction of the Little Palace, sure also that he was every man in-between.

“Careful, Miss Safin. You would not want to be too smart for your own good,” he said, his voice silky and low. “I do wonder where this has come from.” *How did I give myself away?* is what Genya knew he meant.

“From the same set of skills you yourself ensured I had, General. I cannot simply turn them off like taking off a set of ear bobs.”

“I see. Well, we will revisit this conversation soon, Genya. You make good points, but for now we must turn our attention to Alina.” And then, in an instant, his focus was redirected to fetching his wife from his rooms so that Genya could begin right away.

She watched him go through his doors, waited for them to shut before she let herself relax in the slightest. He’d addressed her as *Genya* again—she didn’t let herself visibly breathe a sigh of relief, but she had navigated the rapids and come out on the other side. It had been the weight of years on her shoulders, feeling that she knew this about him but being unable to do anything about it. Unable to say anything, because what purpose would that even serve?

Now, though. Now her hand was played, and she had to wait to make sure that the General took advantage of the information she brought to him. In the meantime, she would look after Alina—and she had a fairly good idea on how she was going to do it.

Alina had convinced Aleksander to step lightly between two paths he’d offered her. He *could* still send her to the country, where she could live quietly and learn her skills alone with a trusted teacher, or he *could* reveal her as the Sun Summoner and have her join the ranks of the Grisha of the Little Palace. She did not want to leave the Little Palace—she had had so few friends in Keramzin while many of the Grisha had gone out of their way to be kind to her here—but she still shied away from the extremely public role of the Sun Summoner. She had very little time to learn everything that would be required of her, and even the idea of the pressure of performing before people sent her into a fit.

After an evening of arguing, they had settled on giving her a private life in the Little Palace, at least for the first few months. Aleksander would teach her himself, though he cautioned her that it had been several years since he’d taught a Summoner and begged her to be patient with him, and she would work hard to create her vision of what the Sun Summoner would be. The way that her husband spoke of creating this separate identity made her wonder at his odd familiarity with the idea, but she appreciated it nonetheless.

She wanted to still be Alina, to still have some of the life she'd planned for herself when she'd been packing to leave Keramzin, and if the price for that was to craft a mask for herself, then so be it.

"Genya," she greeted as she came into the room she'd left not even a half hour before, hugging the other woman and letting Genya cup her face to look into her eyes. She hoped her new friend would not begrudge Alina for wanting some time to come to terms with being the Sun Summoner before telling people. Aleksander had said she would; out of many in the Little Palace, it was Genya who would perhaps be the most understanding. At the moment, he only smiled as Alina walked back into their rooms with Genya, closing the door behind them so that they could speak alone while he continued to work.

"You look well. Like you've finally slept," Genya said, smiling faintly as she swept the pad of her thumb across Alina's cheek.

Alina blushed, looking down and away from her friend. She had indeed been sleeping, for what felt like the first time in her life. The days ended up being fairly long, between getting to know Aleksander and learning how to summon light. They started each morning kneeling in bed across from one another, him helping her flow through a few exercises on how to hold her hands, how to breathe as she moved. After that there was breakfast, where he would focus on catching up on the reports that never ceased while Alina gleefully ate food that finally—finally—tasted good, reveling in her appetite.

"It...it took some getting used to, being here, but I'm glad that I'm being allowed to stay. It still feels a little strange to be so content after...after everything, but Ivan took some time to talk to me about it. Dmitri isn't gone, so much as the warp—"

"The warp and weft, he's always on about the warp and weft," Genya chuckled. "It's a wonder he doesn't knit or weave, the way he carries on. Very spiritual man, our Ivan, and in a better life, we would have him as our Apparat rather than the greasy weasel who currently wears the robes." They giggled together over the image of Ivan with his hair shorn even closer to his head than it was now, clad in the rough woolen clothes that each Apparat took from the body of the last and wore until his death. They were, according to what Alina had heard, held together by the prayers of Sankt Ilya.

The rest of the afternoon was not spent talking of the Apparat or of warps and wefts, but instead of courtly bows and curtsies, of *moi tsar* and *moya tsaritsa*, of other such nonsense. Alina could see that Genya held little respect for the etiquette she was teaching, but it was important to know it. Hopefully the Tsar did not wish for a formal introduction to court for Lady Kirigan—and even if he did, hopefully none would wish to have her return. But Grisha could not trust to hopes like those, so Alina resigned herself to learning how to properly cross her ankles and reading the dull books of decorum and behavior that Genya left her with at the end of the day.

Faking one identity while crafting another was tiring business, she remarked to Aleksander as she snuggled against his silken nightshirt. He laughed, a rueful sound, and kissed her forehead while imploring her to go to sleep.

Please let me know what you thought of this chapter!!! And please don't fret over the "ambiguous ending/open ending" tag - it's also a happy ending!

Entering into Bingo for this chapter:

Sasha is a better teacher | Aleksander kneeling for his sankta | the Apparatus being creepy (it so counts!!) | Sasha's private study

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Again, thank you so, so, so much to the wonderful [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#). This story is so much richer for your help, thank you so much!

One more to go after this...!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina had to ask Genya to repeat herself when the Tsar finally requested that General Kirigan present Madam Kirigan to the court.

“I need your plainest dress for your presentation to the Tsar—I mean it, Alina.”

“But... won’t that make... Genya, that doesn’t make any sense,” she protested, thinking a little longingly of the kefta Aleksander whispered he dreamed of her wearing. Lined with red silken corecloth, like his own, the outer layer golden and embroidered with threads of topaz and pearl white, and accented with tiger’s eyes and labradorite stones. She would not wear it—*could* not wear it—for some time, but she had briefly entertained the idea of a pretty dress to meet the nobility in.

However, Alina had learned in the last two weeks that there was always a reason for the things Genya said and did.

“I promise you, Alina, it is better this way. Neither fine clothes nor servants’ whites can spare you from the Tsar’s eye. For your presentation, we must balance you between being respectable and being forgettable. You may lean more towards forgettable than others, given that you are married to General Kirigan, but not *too* forgettable that he thinks he can overstep. So, your plainest dress, or at least your least favorite one, please.”

Alina shivered at what she heard in every pause between Genya’s carefully chosen words. She reached out and took Genya’s hand, threading her fingers tightly with the Tailor’s, and said nothing. It was not something that could be dragged out of someone, but she could let her friend know that she’d heard. That she understood what she was being told. That she cared.

Genya’s eyes, the true windows to how she felt, shimmered with quickly blinked away tears before she strode to Alina’s small armoire to rifle through her things. While Genya could not change the color or quality of the things she touched, she still had a cultivated eye for appearances and had been slowly acquiring a few more pieces for Alina’s wardrobe. Alina bit her lip as she watched her friend, mulling over the *servants’ white* that her kefta was made in.

She herself had a chemise and underthings now made of the precious corecloth that the keftas were also made out of; it wasn’t that the corecloth did not shine as prettily when it was white as it did when it was black or red or blue or purple, but Genya was the only Grisha who did not have a color.

When Genya started to turn around, Alina plastered a faint smile on her face, forcing herself to pay attention to the choices laid out in front of her.

“Genya must be recalled from the Grand Palace,” she whispered into Aleksander’s shoulder the night before their scheduled audience with the Tsar. It had taken days to work up the courage to give him this command, but in the end she knew she had to ask it of him. She also knew she was more than likely going to get her way.

“Alina—”

“I do not care. I do not care what you have to say—say that my appearance is embarrassing you, say you want her for yourself, I *do*. *Not. Care*. She cannot stay there,” Alina said, propping herself up to look down into his eyes.

There was something distrustful in his gaze as he looked up at her, and she was reminded of his words nearly a month before: he sometimes felt the making had left him alone to force him to trust in others. He’d spent years guarding the secrets of his people, trying to anticipate weaknesses before they became problems. Mistrust was his greatest flaw, but also his greatest weapon. Aleksander still had secrets from her; she was sure of it after recently finding what she thought was probably a secret door in his war room. He could have his secrets—no one lived entirely without them, it was not healthy to have no private memories or thoughts—but he also had to trust her, as she was fast learning to trust him.

“She told me nothing and she asked nothing of me either, but I would have to be blind to not see what you are having her do to protect me from...from him. I appreciate your concern—it makes me feel safe—but Genya is as much *yours* as Fedyor and Ivan are. I want you to keep her safe, as safe as you do them. *You aren’t alone, Sasha.*” She cautiously leaned back down against him, shivering at the darkness that overtook his eyes as she finished speaking.

Aleksander threaded the fingers of one hand into her hair at the back of her head while trailing a fingertip of his free hand from her forehead, down her temple, and contemplatively drawing across her lower lip. “I will find a way, as soon as it may be arranged,” he said, his words barely finished before Alina pulled him towards her for a kiss.

The introduction to the Tsar’s court the next morning went as terribly as Genya had warned her it would. It was a presentation meant to make the Tsar embarrassed to have even demanded the introduction in the first place.

The dress—a dark brown woolen affair—had been painstakingly repaired and teased back to some semblance of life by a Fabrikator named Sofia, but nothing could truly save it or make it more than it was. It was out of fashion by ten years or more, made of wool and bearing a high neckline that was obviously inappropriate for the season. Aleksander had laughed off the idea of her wearing a scarf over her hair, but he and Genya had agreed that a demure black shawl wouldn’t be amiss.

She looked properly silly, and Tsar Pyotr could not look away from her fast enough.

The Tsaritsa, Tatiana, snubbed her openly for not only being half-Shu, but for being so obviously a commoner without any glimmer of desire to be made an ornament of the court. The shawl was what sold it to her, Alina believed, more than the out of fashion dress or her face.

Fashion could be updated, but stick-in-the-mud-modesty could not—and why bother for ‘a half-breed who looks ready to blow away in a strong breeze,’ as the Tsaritsa had loudly whispered to

one of her ladies?

Tsarevich Vasily had visibly concealed a laugh when Aleksander had explained how their marriage had come about. The young man had raised his hand to his mouth to literally cover his mirth, as though it was a laughing matter that the guards of the *Grand* Palace had let slip the watch schedule of the *Little* Palace. As though it was a laughing matter that dozens had been injured. As though it was a laughing matter that there had been multiple deaths, including Grisha who were so integral to his father's various wars.

Alina had somehow found it in herself to merely blush and look down as though she was ashamed rather than enraged, tugging at her shawl to wrap it closer around herself.

She wished she could blind them all. Aleksander thought it possible, if she summoned substantial enough light, though she almost didn't believe him; he never even blinked at her light, no matter how bright it got. The way he looked at her made up for any of his lingering secrets—whatever they were.

"Did it go well?" Genya asked as soon as Alina returned. Genya had been a nervous wreck all morning—Fedyor and a dozen other corporalki had retrieved her from the Grand Palace at daybreak, carrying all of her belongings with them, and had left her in Alina and Aleksander's rooms where she would be safe until her own rooms were prepared for her.

It was not the most elegant way of extracting Genya from the grasping hands of the royal family, but Alina had not cared as she hugged Genya tightly. She hadn't dared to think Aleksander would move this quickly, but he had and she was grateful.

"The Tsar wished he hadn't asked us to come—he looked like he was praying to every Saint he could think of that the ground would open beneath him. The Tsaritsa wants nothing to do with me, not even to 'fix' me, and Vasily outright laughed at the idea of marrying a fallen comrade's widow."

"What excellent news," Genya managed, her voice a little thick with emotion, her arms still tight around Alina. "Now, we are scrapping this dress for cleaning rags. Hand it over."

Alina was picking over her lunch when Aleksander returned. She pushed out her chair and skipped over to him, the velvet robe Genya had wrapped her in swinging heavily as he caught her up and spun her around a quarter turn before he set her back on her feet and kissed her. She let herself forget the events of the throne room in favor of running her fingers through his hair, clutching at his shoulder, trying to catch a breath between kisses.

"You," he said, kissing the corner of her mouth, "were," now to her pulse-point in her neck, "*perfect*," with a nip to her collarbone. Alina giggled, pulling him away from her neck to kiss him again.

When they eventually settled the heat in their blood, he led them to the small chaise he'd had moved into his private study. He stretched out and let Alina cuddle into his side, just breathing together in the stillness of their rooms. There was a looseness to his expression now, and Alina traced the lines at the corners of his eyes with a gentle fingertip, realizing that he'd been more and more stressed as today drew closer.

"Thank you," she whispered as she pressed their foreheads together, just brushing her nose against his and taking comfort in their closeness. "Thank you for saving Genya. I know it must have come

at a high cost, but I'm not sorry for asking it of you."

Would she have had these kinds of battles with Dmitri—especially given that he'd been Grisha, secretly living among the all-otkaznik oprichniki—or would she have had others? Alina pushed those musings away for the time being; she did not have to worry about that future anymore.

"I'm glad you asked it of me. I lost sight of my goal with what Genya was supposed to be doing in the Grand Palace. I've lived a long time, milaya, but my jaded soul ought not have been my excuse."

Alina thought back to the hidden door she was sure she'd found, though she still couldn't get it to open, and she gathered her courage. It would no doubt break apart their tranquil afternoon, and there was always something upsetting to learn by prying into someone's secrets, but perhaps he would be willing to tell her. It could not be good to live without ever unburdening himself of the things that pained him.

"I found something I think you should know about, if you don't already, but I have a question first," she said, deciding that he would give her something in return for the knowledge she had. "How long have you lived? I...please tell me. The truth. You don't have to tell me a single other thing, I promise."

Aleksander froze, and she almost thought that he looked *alarmed* at her words. Alina tried to sit up, to give him some space, but he didn't let her go—he held her tighter, even. Then something broke in his gaze, and he tentatively unwrapped one arm from around her to stroke her cheek. He looked at her like she was all he'd ever needed in the world, and that simultaneously thrilled and terrified her.

How thin of a thread had he been hanging by, before he'd discovered her power? Had anyone ever known such an immediately devoted partner, after only weeks of knowing each other? What would he do if he ever lost her? The questions were heavy in her heart, but not heavier than the ones she had for herself—what would *she* do to someone that tried to take all of this away from her? Tried to make her small and weak again?

"Are you sure?"

Taking a deep breath and leaning her cheek into his palm, Alina nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, please, please let me know what you thought!!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Oof this is the end of an era isn't it?

This chapter is...quite a lot longer than the others, comparatively, but I think it flows nicely enough and we deserve to go out with a bang! ~~Like Dmitri~~

Beta read and made beautiful by the lovely [Nightquills](#) and [Spacecadet72](#) who have been so wonderful and giving the whole time. I appreciate you both so much, I can't begin to sing your praises highly enough!! The **gorgeous** mood board was also made by Nightquills, so please follow the link over to tumblr and throw her some love for that! <3

Also thank you to TwiceKilledCatherine for the help with the Russian in this chapter!!

Dhakin is a name I workshopped a little on the Darklina server for Grishaverse India, it is what the word Deccan comes from, aka the Deccan Plateau aka most of modern India. Ishak and Neetu are from there.

Also: you can all thank Nightquills for the Pain(TM) in the middle. You'll know when you get there.

Lastly: I heartily recommend listening to [Green Island Serenade](#) while you read.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)



The Bright Beauty of the Moonlight

by Silberias



[moodboard made by nightquills](#)

When the Tsar had originally sent word that he wished to meet this mysterious Madam Kirigan, Alina had not gone to Genya with her questions, but to Ivan. Ivan, who did not shoo her away from his desk because by the time she'd made it to his small office, all of his confidential documents were put away. That day, he'd been writing out a list of tasks to be accomplished—simple and mundane things that didn't need to be kept from prying eyes.

“Has...has General Kirigan ever done this before? Married someone for...for duty, I mean,” she'd asked and Ivan had stilled.

“He would not be the man I believe him, *know* him, to be if he had not.”

“Who was she?”

The look Ivan had leveled at her made Alina want to take her question back. Like she was a fool—one he had been willing to indulge, but not without this one moment of mental complaint. His

answer had felt like he was showing her the truth but there was too much smoke in the room to make it out.

“Not in all of Kirigan’s years has he ever done this, moreover *Kirigan* has never married.”

“That’s—” she had hesitated, not wanting to get Genya in trouble, but now Ivan knew she had a question and she couldn’t lie to him. “That’s not what Genya told me. She said that he was married a long time ago. That she’d been ill, and lived in the country for her health.” Alina had not liked the idea that she’d been sleeping beside a man who let her believe a lie.

“That was a pretty fiction to keep the previous Tsar from playing matchmaker. You’ll understand after you meet the royal family. The General should have told you, but perhaps he doesn’t know you’ve only been given the official story.”

The official story. She had not been able to meet Ivan’s eyes then, picking instead at one of her nails as she wished she could talk to him about her own *official story*. It felt wrong to lie to those around her, who were so kind despite believing she was not one of them.

“He told me, you know,” Ivan said. “When I mentioned that you’ve been looking healthier, he told me the sunshine in Os Alta has agreed with you. Has it?”

Heartrenders could *feel* when you lied, but she had gotten the feeling that right then, Ivan would have understood if she lied to him. Alina did not want to lie to him, though; she wanted someone she could talk to aside from Aleksander.

“Very much so,” she had said, unable to contain her happiness at the brief but warm look that Ivan gave her before he turned his attention to his lists again. It wasn’t a dismissal, but there was nothing more to be said on the topic for the moment. Alina had been glad of the silence as she mulled over what she’d learned in the span of that quarter hour.

Now though, weeks later in the closeness of their rooms, Ivan’s words hit differently. Alina had somehow already known that *Sergei Aleksander Kirigan* wasn’t his name, had begun to suspect that much of his history was a kind of pantomime. How much of it was or wasn’t true was something she would have to figure out on her own. Some other Alina would have been horrified at what she’d pieced together from Ivan’s cryptic hints, coupled with this exposure of an outright lie, but this Alina could not be.

She’d been educated about the Black Heretic as a child. Of all the heretics and sinners and other shunned figures in Ravka, the shadow summoner of Tsar Anastas was the most hated and reviled. The Tsar had condemned him, had put a thousand year bounty on his head for betraying Ravka when it was at its weakest. The books all said the Black Heretic had killed half the Tsar’s court and hundreds of the Tsar’s men, that he’d been working with Ravka’s enemies well before he’d even created the Shadow Fold.

Alina had always wondered how this had come about, though, for other books painted the Black Heretic and the Tsar as bosom companions—brothers in all but blood. For them to turn on one another did not seem fully possible, at least not in the way that it had always been explained to her.

Aleksander had answered her question, and she pieced together the rest. He was somewhere past his eight hundredth year, though he wasn’t entirely sure on the specifics given his youth spent on the run with his mother. The tension was back in his face, but this was far worse than it had been when he had only fretted about her meeting the Tsar.

“I’m so sorry you’ve been alone so long,” she finally managed to say, moving to hold him to her tightly as she tucked her face into the crook of his neck. “You aren’t anymore, though.”

Even if he’d done everything they said he had in the history books, he had also protected Ravka. Each Darkling had knelt before the Tsar and sworn to defend Ravka, sworn to protect its people—he had saved many, many people over the years. The Fold...she would not ask him about that yet. He would tell her in his own time soon enough.

“Alina.” His voice was pained, and thick with emotion. “*Alina.*” She held him tighter, kissing his throat and shivering when he swallowed back whatever else he was going to say.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said almost directly into his skin, and he quaked in her arms. “Promise me you’ll tell me the rest soon?”

It was hard to tell, but she thought he nodded, his breath juddering in and out of his chest. The Little Palace was built on keeping secrets in and intruders out, and she’d accepted that before she’d left Keramzin—she’d accepted that her life would change, irrevocably, by coming here. That whatever she learned or knew would mean she was bound tighter and tighter to this place and the people who lived here.

“What did you have to tell me?”

“I...I hope you already know of it, but there’s something like a secret door in your war room. I don’t know how to get it open, and now...now, I’m a little glad I didn’t succeed. If it’s yours, then...then there’s that. But in case you didn’t, I wanted you to know.”

“I see, yes. That is an escape tunnel. There are many, though few connect together. That one opens in two places—one is the cellar of the guardhouse at the wall, and the other opens into the stables we use for visiting dignitaries and the like. The only way to open it from the outside is by summoning shadows to manipulate the mechanism. Not even a lodestone could open it.”

They fell silent then, each ruminating on their conversation. She wished she felt like she could interrogate him, could rake him over the coals and make him tell her everything, but Alina knew that wasn’t possible. She’d only known Aleksander for a little over a month, and he could very smoothly deflect questions he didn’t want to answer—even and perhaps especially direct ones.

It pleased her that he’d been honest about the number of years he’d seen, but that did not mean he would be as open with her about anything else. Instead, she could only hold to the numbers—if he was older than the Fold, he must have been the one to make it. Shadow Summoners were rare, only appearing every couple hundred years throughout most of history. There were more since the making of the Fold, but they were still rare enough that she could probably look up no more than a handful of names.

Tears unexpectedly sprang to her eyes and she whimpered, fighting them. Aleksander only stroked her hair and rubbed comforting circles at her back. She found she didn’t fear him as she maybe should have, knowing he could only be the Black Heretic himself.

Instead, she feared for herself. Aleksander had an iron will that had seen him through centuries of heartbreak and loss. *She* would go from a nobody, laughed at by the royal family, to a near-saint—Zolotaya Svyataya to the people, and the long-wished for Sun Summoner to the Grisha. A weapon in the eyes of the Lantsovs, as well as in the eyes of Ravka’s enemies.

“Alina, what can I do? Tell me, and I will do it,” he asked, not shushing her tears but simply letting her cry.

“What—what if I’m the brand new heretic? They—they—they will all want something different, and—”

“Please, Alina, believe me. If you believe *anything*,” he interrupted, nuzzling his cheek against her hair, “believe that I will not let that happen. I promise.” His sure words, repeated a few times as she calmed down, settled over her like a blanket and she dozed off.

She dreamed not exactly *pleasant* dreams, but Aleksander was with her in each of them. She dreamed of the post carriage, weeks ago, but this time he sat between her and the other passengers on her side of the carriage. She dreamed of Keramzin, watching Mal walk down the lane to the wagon train that the new recruits took to get to the army’s basic training—but she held Aleksander’s hand as she waved her friend off, not alone after all. She dreamed of a place that wasn’t a place—warm and inviting, where stars and darkness grew out of one another like the painful blue-black-white-red bursts that clouded her vision if she stared at the sun for a moment too long—and she wondered at what she was seeing, wondered if in this third dream she’d been left alone. And then she heard him talking behind her, and then suddenly he was before her, his shadows swirling and plucking at the light that she’d started to shed.

“I have seen your face in the making at the heart of the world, and there is no one more beloved, Alina,” he said, tugging her hand—bound again to his, wrist to wrist—to bring her close again.

She grinned, her face aching from how wide and bright it was. She gleefully repeated his words to him in full, knowing that this time they were heartfelt—only to whimper in pain as the handfasting cord went taut around their wrists, cutting into the skin. Aleksander growled and she saw him summoning, saw him forming his shadows into a sharp, honed edge. She cried out, putting her free hand on top of where the cord was wrapped around them, her fingers slipping in the blood. And just like that—his shadows dissipated as he realized he would hurt her if he did this, his anger cooling to nothing, and the cord melted away as though sinking into their skin to bind itself around their bones.

Alina shot up in bed, breathing hard and disoriented in the afternoon light. Aleksander was blinking awake next to her, an odd and cautious stillness on his face as he looked up at her. She didn’t have to wonder, looking at him, if he had seen what she had—she reached for his hand, linking their fingers together.

“Alina...”

“You wouldn’t, right?” she asked, not even knowing what she meant. “You were—you were going to sever it—but you wouldn’t, if I asked you not to?”

He said her name again, the sound of it broken, and his eyes were wet with tears. She couldn’t know what he’d planned—what the making had made them show each other—but she could stop it now. As much as the future might hold for them, whatever pain there might be, she knew she could trust him to stop before he hurt her.

“I’m not... Alina, I don’t know how to do all of this.” The words obviously cost him something dear to speak aloud. “I don’t know how. We are running out of time to make somewhere in this world safe for Grisha, not just from the enemies beyond our borders who seek our deaths, but from the way Ravka...Ravka isn’t safe either. Not under—”

She knew in her heart he would never ask it of her, the way he broke off and looked away, and that was how she knew she had to say it for him.

“Not under the Lantsovs, you mean.”

Aleksander wordlessly shook his head, agreeing with her words even though he still averted his eyes. Like he was ashamed for his fears, for his plotting. She reached out a hesitant hand and turned him to face her again, petting his cheek once as she did.

“We promised each other an awful lot, for two people who hardly knew one another,” she said with a kind of rueful amusement, moving to wrap her hand around where he held her other one.

He didn’t smile, but he didn’t frown, either. He only watched her with his too-dark eyes.

She remembered Ivan’s words about pretty fictions to keep the Lantsovs from inserting themselves even further into the Little Palace. The guards of the Grand Palace, loose lipped and taking payment from Fjerdan spies—sent for undoubtedly by the Tsaritsa—who had killed and wounded so many. The horrors that the Tsar had inflicted on Genya and probably countless others, Grisha and Otkazat’sya alike.

“But we promised, nonetheless. So as long as you also promise to trust me with your plans, Aleksander, as long as you don’t leave me behind, as long as you stay your hand when I ask you to, you can believe I will trust you. I won’t leave you behind. I will stay *my* hand when you ask me to. I promise.”

He squeezed her hands, drawing out her light with his own powers easily.

“I promise, Alina.”

“Please, Alina, believe me. If you believe *anything*,” he interrupted, nuzzling his cheek against her hair, “believe that I will not let that happen. I promise.” He repeated himself until Alina calmed, relaxing against him finally, and he slipped off to sleep soon after—he rarely dreamed, anymore, but soon enough his mind turned against him.

The dreams made his heart *ache*. The first was of the night he’d escaped Os Alta, before the Fold. One of the page boys had tipped him off, and originally there hadn’t been time to grab anything, only the black kefta—the one he’d chosen not to wear out of respect to the army he’d joined, wearing their uniforms with a kind of pride he’d spent much of his life concealing—and what he could stuff into the saddlebags. Aleksander had run as the evening darkened around him, swallowing back his anxiety at riding so fast on a moonless night. Only this time Alina was astride his mare, reaching her hand down to him to help him up, her dark eyes steady on his. The life he’d carved out serving Anastas had been fleeting, but what was dust to sunshine?

His desperate flight from Anastas’s betrayal bled into his first vision of the Little Palace. Aleksander had been living as Pyotr Grigoriev for years, carefully aging under the expert hands of a Tailor from Dhakin named Ishak, but had had to ‘pass away’ as all mortal men did. Thankfully, Ishak and his daughter, Neetu, understood and rendered him all the aid they could. Neetu was a heartrender who declared that Old Pyotr was dead, and that she and Ishak would prepare his body and return him to the making—he had not wanted a grand funeral, only wanting to return to the making to see his long-dead family.

Aleksander had returned as Pyotr's great-nephew Artem, separated from the family by the Fold, and had cried at the Little Palace rising proudly above the sturdy palisade of the main complex. He'd entered alone, but now Alina walked arm in arm with him, her eyes alight with pleasure at seeing the grounds as they'd first been. Hard-won, but beautiful despite it. Because of it.

"Pyotr?" The old woman had startled him then, and she startled him now. Then her face had been curious, disbelieving despite the warmth in her eyes, and they had exchanged an ocean of grief in a single moment as he'd nodded and then shaken his head—the woman had been Neetu's eldest daughter, a girl of ten when he'd left. Now, she looked at him and Alina with an unmistakable pride.

"Pyotr?" Alina's voice was soft, hardly there. "Pyot—"

He turned to her, but found nothing. "Py—ot—r"

Aleksander had seen the making once, as a boy half-drowned and freezing—he knew it had come for him again.

"—r—er—ksander—*Aleksander?*!"

Blinking quickly, he saw Alina, desperate as she looked at him—pain writ large on her face—and then at their hands, joined, bound, *bleeding*, and realized he held the cut over that fragile bond. Their blood welled up between Alina's fingers, tears welling in her eyes—and he let his shadows go. Alina had always been meant for him: to walk with him, to guide him, to keep him safe. And just like that, the blood ceased to flow and the binding ceased pinching, melting away into their wrists without a trace.

He woke when Alina jolted up next to him and reached for his hand. He didn't know what Alina had seen in the making, but whatever it was had calmed her, and he knew he would do anything for her. Anything.

The day that she was to be crowned Grand Princess of Ravka, Alina went to the walls of the Little Palace. She walked arm in arm with Genya, Ivan leading the way to one of the recent sections of wall, while a few guards and other attendants trailed behind them. It had been a year to the day since she'd last come here, come out to the forest where the funerals were held. She'd never been to the wall, hadn't been able to come up with a reason that made sense to her. No one had asked it of her—no one had even implied that a visit was expected. The dead were dead, the alive were alive.

Yesterday, Aleksander had knelt and allowed the Duke of Caryeva to place a circlet of gold on his brow. The band was not even a half inch wide and was plain, unadorned with jewels or decorative etchings. It shone bright against his dark hair, and Alina had almost wished that his intended crown for her was a similar one. But their ruse for this afternoon required a certain flair that a simple band of gold would not deliver. The crown had come this morning in a box lined with golden Shu silk, with opals and pearls and garnets delicately affixed to the intricate metalwork. Thinking of it now sent her heart racing. A year ago, she'd been an orphan from Keramzin with no future, shivering and frightened in a smoky dawn, and this afternoon—she shied away from the idea still.

Aleksander had not accepted the title of *Tsar* from the people who had overthrown Pyotr. He had been gentle as he declined it, saying that Ravka honored him to so entrust itself to him, but that the people had seen enough of Tsars who answered to no one. The cadre of First Army, aristocrats, and

wealthy merchants who he had coordinated with had expected it, having the ready title of Grand Prince to bestow on him instead. It had been the work of Genya at the head of a crew of skilled spies to nurture the dissent of the people, to make them resent the treatment of the Lantsovs—and Alina knew her own story had been integral to that resentment. It spread far and wide, into West Ravka as well, that the Tsar had laughed at her misfortune, that his son had sniggered at General Kirigan for marrying the widow of the man who'd saved his life. That the *Grisha*, it was said, knew more honor than the Lantsovs was telling.

None of the movers and shakers of Ravka wanted to have the political repercussions land squarely on their shoulders, which made it appealing to settle that weight on Aleksander's—and it had not taken much convincing. He was humble where the Tsar was boastful. He was tactful where the Tsarevich was uncouth. His wife was demure where the Tsaritsa made it a point to change her jewels several times a day so as not to bore the court. His *Grisha* were loyal soldiers, the same as many of the other sons and daughters of Ravka were, while Vasily could barely hold a sword and Nikolai hadn't been seen at a royal function in years.

Alina wished she could have convinced him that a more obscure role would fulfill his goals, but that was not to be. After the Lantsovs had been deposed, a life of quiet anonymity was out of her reach. Perhaps not forever—she *had* managed to get Aleksander to agree not to become an immortal prince, but to limit his rule to a lifetime at least. He had vowed to her that they would travel afterwards, and Genya had quietly promised that while it was in her power, she would ensure that Alina and Aleksander always “*looked every bit what people would expect them to be.*”

Everyone had been trying to ensure that Alina, who nearly everyone still believed to be an ungifted *otkazat'sya*, did not suffer unduly during the transition. It was sometimes a little stifling, but no one had stood in her way when she said she wished to come here *before* she took her place at Aleksander's side.

“Alina, do you want us to give you some privacy?” Genya asked as Ivan worked on searching the wall.

“I would appreciate that, I—you don't have to go far,” she replied, watching as Ivan found the name they'd come looking for. She stepped closer, letting go of Genya's arm in favor of taking Ivan's. Her grip on his wrist must have been vicelike, but he didn't let it show on his face.

DMITRI ANOKHIN - OPRICHNIK

“We do not always get to choose how we are remembered, *dorogaya moya*,” Ivan said softly, one hand coming up to cover hers. “We must accept that we are who we choose to be.”

“I can't remember his face,” she whispered, remembering only a cold room, a gray uniform, a red ribbon. She could still remember the horrible smoke, though, and Polina's face bleached of life as she hesitated over the flints in Alina's hands.

“You did not see it in the making; it makes sense you would not see it now,” Ivan said, letting go of her hand and helping her to kneel down before stepping away.

She was quiet, staring at the engraved brick, her hand resting on her middle.

“Hello, Dmitri,” she said, once Ivan led the others some distance away from her. “I'm sorry I've been away. I haven't forgotten you, but Aleksander does have a way of monopolizing the time. We...I...I've decided if we have a boy, we will name him for you. We will teach him to be brave,

and selfless, and make sure that his hands are strong even if he isn't a summoner like us. You took such a chance on me, and you changed my life by answering my letter. I can't imagine...I wish I could have met you, could have had our life together. I said goodbye to that, though, and I...I came to say goodbye to the life I've had so far, I suppose. I will spend every day making sure that Aleksander acts in a way that honors you, honors what you believed in. I promise, Dmitri."

The brick was cold on her lips as she leaned forward to press a kiss there before leaning her forehead on his name. She would have loved him as she now loved Aleksander. It wasn't in her nature to do otherwise.

The walk back to the Little Palace was a blur—they'd elected to continue to call it the Little Palace, given that the rebels had demanded the Grand Palace and its treasures be used to secure a new future for Ravka. The awful, sprawling building was to become a house of law, where Ravkans could go to debate laws they wished their Grand Prince to adopt or revise—but also a place of study, for the scholarly pursuits of those not born to lofty stations in life.

She knew Aleksander was hesitant to put so much faith in the people; she knew he'd seen the people turn on the Grisha before, and she knew that even if this endeavor failed, his trust in her was unbreakable—even if it ended up that he had to trust she would learn from her mistakes.

Alina hoped that their stunt this afternoon would not be a mistake. They had practiced for weeks, and she still sometimes let nerves get the better of her. It had to be perfect today. Alina held fast to Aleksander's warm eyes, his careful touch, his smile when he saw the light she called into being. Almost without her noticing—not the bath, not the serving maids, not Genya, not the walk from her rooms to what had been decided was their throne room—Alina was kneeling before the Duke of Caryeva as Aleksander had yesterday afternoon. Aleksander sat in his ebony chair, his face and body in perfect stillness. To either side of him were two more seats—one, the Sun Summoner's chair, the other being another ebony chair decorated with black and garnet ribbons. For the last year she had avoided the Sun Summoner's chair, glad to learn her summoning with Aleksander and Ivan in private while otherwise keeping her secret from all others.

"—and do you, Alina Kirigan, swear to support your people and your prince, to think always of the common good, to safeguard all who call Ravka their home in their hearts?"

"I so swear," she said, trying to force her voice to be high and clear, to make it echo just slightly in the room—a counterpoint to Aleksander's low and sure voice.

"Then by the demand of the people of Ravka," the Duke said, as only an aristocrat could have the audacity to say, "I lay this crown on your head to remind you of your duty and your oaths, and I name you Grand Princess Alina." The second the crown touched her head, Alina closed her eyes and called on her light, knowing it was blinding in its intensity.

The crowd gasped, cries going up in alarm and wonder alike. Aleksander played his part, startled into standing and half-reaching for her—his wife turned saint.

The attendees murmured and whispered, and Alina caught snippets of conversation—they said they were blessed, that Ravka was saved. Zolotaya Svyataya had come now that the Lantsovs were gone, and it was a sign the Saints favored their new Grand Prince. Alina had agonized over whether she should make a speech of some kind and had even half-memorized one—but she did not want to give speeches. Instead, she opened her eyes, letting the light slowly decrease, and reached out to Aleksander. He looked half-ready to weep, tears brimming and ready to fall, as his quick strides ate up the distance between them.

“What is happening?” she made sure to say it just loud enough for everyone to hear, but not loud enough to seem contrived. The light was still pouring out of her, but it was no longer blinding.

“Oh, my dear,” he said as he drew her to her feet, guiding her not to the seat decorated especially for her use by Fedyor and Polina, but to the long-empty Sun Summoner’s chair. Once she was seated, her light now a glow to her skin and a natural halo about her head, Aleksander knelt with her hand clasped between his two as he said, “My own love, my Alina.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn't set out to make a bunch of new headcanons for myself with Grisha traditions, but here we are. I also didn't mean for them to get themselves set up as the rulers of Ravka, but that's where the story took us! I've appreciated the massive response you all gave me, and you have yourselves and your enthusiasm to thank for the chapter count going from 5 to 9, and it is getting such love from folks that keeps people writing fic <3

Also yes, this is the end of the Poor Dead Dmitri verse...or is it?! Keep your hearts open and your eyes sharp!

If you liked this please let me know, I am anxious to know what you all think!

End Notes

So the first few chapters aren't going to look very Darklina and I'm sorry for that. Poor Dead Dmitri kind of took over my brain & all the folks brainstorming over on the Darklina server with me.

That said, please let me know what you think!!

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by [Spacecadet72](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!